

EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

Ministerial Conference, Paris, May 24 – 25, 2018

Statement by Sjur Bergan, Council of Europe

Check against delivery

Ministers, ladies and gentlemen,

Fundamental values are like quality: few speak openly against and few admit to aiming for second best. Both are part of our discourse, yet we rarely define what we mean.

The fundamental values of the European Higher Education Area make it to the news when they are grossly violated. That has, alas, become less rare.

When a law is changed to make it impossible for a university to continue operation because of its foreign connections, this violates our standards and commitments. When academics are arrested or banned from foreign travel for the same reasons, this violates our standards and commitments. When students and staff are prevented from organizing freely, this violates our standards and commitments.

- So my first question is: what are we going to do about this as the EHEA? What will you do as Ministers?

Yet not all threats to fundamental EHEA values are spectacular. Unlike incomplete qualifications frameworks, they are not easy to measure. Nevertheless, beaches of fundamental values endanger our common basis and our common pursuit of quality. Excellence cannot be based on stifled questions, political conformism, and the closing of minds.

We tend to see institutional autonomy as the legal relationship between public authorities and higher education institutions.

Granted, we cannot have academic freedom and institutional autonomy if our laws prevent them. But we will not automatically get them just because our laws say so.

Discussing institutional autonomy also means considering the proper role of public authorities, since education systems are under their responsibility.

Few would argue that safety regulations for labs, public accounting standards, or rules against discrimination in hiring and access should not apply to higher education institutions. Public authorities have a legitimate concern for ensuring higher education provision in all parts of the country.

- Second question: How do we balance the autonomy of institutions and the responsibility of public authorities for the system?

We also tend to see academic freedom and institutional autonomy as two sides of the same coin. But one does not necessarily follow the other.

It is tempting to define academic freedom as freedom of speech tempered by academic standards. Yet, standards evolve. New knowledge and understanding have sometimes been developed against the standards of the discipline at the time.

- Third question: how can public authorities ensure both academic freedom and institutional autonomy? How can we make sure we do not forget about academic freedom by focusing only on autonomy?

Nor does higher education automatically foster democratic culture. It is easy to find examples of academics who displayed courage in their commitment to democracy. It is also not difficult to find counter-examples. There are White Roses but there are also Shining Paths.

The Council of Europe has developed a Reference Framework of Competences Democratic Culture that is as pertinent to higher education as to any other part of the education system.

- Fourth question: how can we, as the EHEA, ensure that higher education fosters a culture of democracy?

So our fundamental values present something of a paradox. We are in fact speaking about gliding transitions and shades of gray – never mind how many – rather than clear borders drawn in black and white.

Therefore, the Council of Europe will explore academic freedom and institutional autonomy at a conference on June 20 - 21, 2019. We will do so with several partners, including some from the US and South Africa.

Where Europe focuses more on autonomy, the US focuses more on academic freedom. Where Europe has a solid record in the participation of staff and students in governance, others have valuable experience with the broader societal role of higher education.

Our cooperation will, we hope, develop our understanding, help us defend fundamental academic values, help prepare the 2020 ministerial conference, and contribute to giving the European Higher Education Area a global dimension. And we hope to contribute to making our value bases a key element in the further development of the EHEA.